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AUTHOR McCord, Joan
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ABSTRACT

Possible explanatory theories of the relationship between broken homes and crime include the following: (1) broken homes lead to crimes if there are "catalytic agents"; (2) broken homes lead to crime if these homes fail to provide certain conditions which promote socialization; and (3) broken homes and crime have a common source, but not a causal relationship. Each of these possibilities was tested by using data from a longitudinal study of 230 males, including the descriptions of childhood homes collected 30 years prior to collection of information about criminality. Because crimes were generally committed after termination of the project from which data about childhood had been gathered, unidirectionality of relationships between home variables and crimes was assumed. Derivations from propositional calculus permitted identification of the third explanatory theory as the only one consistent with the evidence. (Author)

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A LONGITUDINAL STUDY OF THE LINK BETWEEN BROKEN HOMES AND CRIMINALITY *

Joan McCord

Department of Psychology and Sociology, Drexel University

Paper presented at the 1978 annual meeting of
National Council on Family Relations,
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
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A LONGITUDINAL STUDY OF THE LINK BETWEEN BROKEN HOMES AND CRIMINALITY

Circumstantial evidence appears to support a common belief that broken homes cause crime. Crime rates tend to be high in areas marked by social disorganization, where broken homes are prevalent. Furthermore, a number of studies have reported reliable relationships between broken homes and crime. Glueck and Glueck (1951) found a higher proportion from broken homes among 500 incarcerated delinquents than among 500 non-delinquents who were from the same neighborhoods. Nye (1958) reported a small, but reliable, relationship between broken homes and self-reported delinquency. Willie (1967), after controlling for categories of affluence, found higher rates of juvenile delinquency in District of Columbia census tracts that had higher proportions of broken homes. Wadsworth (in press), after controlling effects of adverse financial changes, found a reliable relationship between broken homes and subsequent delinquency in England.

On the other hand, inspection of the Gluecks' evidence indicates that homes in which no substitute had replaced the missing parent were not overrepresented among the delinquents (McCord et al., 1962). Nye (1958) found that the most delinquent youths were more likely to have unbroken but conflictful homes than to have broken homes. Wadsworth (in press) points out that even when effects of broken homes are added to other predictive variables, discrimination between delinquents and non-delinquents is relatively poor.

Other studies have failed to find a relationship between broken homes and crime. Robins (1966), for example, found that broken homes were not predictive of sociopathy. Robins and Hill (1966) found no elevation of delinquency rates among boys reared in broken homes. Neither Guze (1964) nor Meade (1973) confirmed their expectations of finding a relationship between recidivism and broken homes.

The inconsistent results of studies assessing the relationship between broken homes and crime suggest three possible links between them:

1) Broken homes may be potentially criminogenic, requiring "catalytic agents" for their relationship to criminal behavior to develop. Broken homes might lead to crime, for example, only if parents provide models of aggression.

2) Broken homes may lead to crime if they are broken homes of a certain type. The effects of broken homes, that is, may depend on what happens after the break. If the home lacks affection or the child is unsupervised, for example, perhaps broken homes contribute to the causes of crime.

3) Broken homes may be a consequence of conditions which lead to crime. The link between broken homes and criminality, on this model, is accidental. Though crime and broken homes might vary together, one would err in concluding that parental absence is a cause of crime.

Correct identification of the appropriate model for describing the link between broken homes and crime has practical, as well as theoretical, importance. The first model suggests that efforts to reduce

crime might be successful if they are directed toward reducing the rate of broken homes in families exposed to "catalytic agents." The second model suggests that efforts to reduce crime might be successful if they are directed toward providing assistance for parents in broken homes, so that these homes do not become criminogenic. The third model suggests that efforts to reduce crime are not likely to be successful if they focus upon broken homes.

Sample Description and Research Method

Records of 230 men (from 230 families) who had been part of a counseling program designed to prevent delinquency provided the information used in this study.[1] As boys, these men had lived in factory-dominated communities in eastern Massachusetts. When the boys were between the ages of 9 and 16, counselors had visited them approximately twice a month for five years. Between 1939 and 1945, the counselors recorded their observations of the boys and their families. These case records were coded in 1957.

Between 1975 and 1978, the men were retraced. The majority, 174 men, were found in Massachusetts; 50 have been located in other states; and 6 (3%) remain to be found. Court records were searched to learn which of the men had been convicted for serious crimes, ranging from larceny to kidnapping and attempted murder. Eighty had been convicted for at least one serious crime: 31 only as juveniles; 21 both as juveniles and adults; and 28 were first convicted after reaching the age of eighteen.

One hundred of the 230 men had been reared in broken homes. Among them, 69 were reared by their natural mothers, 13 had been reared by their natural fathers, and 18 were reared by "parent substitutes."[2] Thirty fathers and 19 mothers had died. Divided by age, 36 men had lost one or both parents prior to the age of five. Neither the boys' age at the time of loss nor whether the absent parents had died was reliably related to criminal records.

The coded case records were used to describe the childhood homes of the men on four qualitative dimensions. Supervision had been classified as present, sporadic, or absent. For the present study, this variable was dichotomized so that only boys in the first category were rated as "supervised." Parental conflict had been classified as considerable, some, or none evident. This variable, too, was dichotomized for the present study: those whose parents had been in considerable conflict were rated as having experienced conflict. Descriptive categories had been used to note the attitudes of each parent toward the boys. For the present study, these descriptions were grouped to yield a rating of "affection" if the parent or parents present in the home had been considered actively affectionate toward the child. The behavior of each parent had been classified on two variables related to aggression: one described disciplinary technique and one described general aggressiveness. The reliability of ratings, based on agreement between two raters reading 25 case studies, ranged from .84 (parents' attitude toward boy) to 1.00 (for mothers' techniques of discipline).[3]

Each of the four measures of the home (supervision, parental conflict, parental affection, and parental aggression) was reliably related to subsequent criminality, $p < .001$. They provide a basis for understanding the link between broken homes and criminality.

Results

Among the men in the study, crime was not more prevalent for men who had been reared in broken homes. As shown in Table 1, men from broken homes were neither more likely to be convicted for a serious crime nor, if convicted at all, more likely to commit many crimes.

(Table 1 about here)

Analyses of relationships between broken homes and the qualitative scales indicated that boys reared in broken homes were (not surprisingly) more often exposed to conflict, Phi(1)=.288, p=.0001, and less likely to be supervised, Phi(1)=-.239, p=.0003. Parental aggressiveness was not reliably associated with broken homes. Within broken homes, however, parental aggression was associated with rejection, Phi(1)=.242, p=.0156. Rejection and parental aggression were not associated with one another in unbroken homes. Boys from broken homes were <u>more</u> likely to have only affectionate parents, Phi(1)=.191, p=.0038. Yet among boys who had affectionate parents, a higher proportion of those from broken homes (72%) than of those from unbroken homes (38%) had been exposed to conflict or aggression or lacked supervision, Phi(1)=.346, p=.0015.

Clearly, then, men raised in broken homes had experienced environments quite different from those of men raised in unbroken homes.

The first of the proposed links between broken homes and crime suggests that a "catalytic agent" might determine whether or not broken homes lead to crime. To test this model, the men were divided according to whether they had been exposed to conflict or an aggressive parent. If one or both of these forms of behavior are necessary for increased crime rates among broken homes, a higher proportion of men from broken homes who had been exposed to one or both of these conditions than of men from unbroken homes exposed to these conditions should have been convicted for serious crimes. (See Table 2)

(Table 2 about here)

As Table 2 demonstrates, there is little difference between crime rates in broken and unbroken homes when the boy was exposed to either conflict or aggression (but not both); and though the difference is not reliable, crime rates are slightly lower among men from broken homes, given exposure to both conflict and an aggressive parent.

The second of the proposed links suggests that crime might be prevalent among broken homes which lack the ingredients for producing law-abiding citizens. To test this possibility, the men were divided according to whether they had affectionate parents or had been supervised in their leisure time. If absence of one or both of these socializing conditions produced criminogenic effects in broken homes,

men exposed to rejection or lacking supervision during childhood ought to have particularly high rates of crime if they came from broken homes. (See Table 3.)

(Table 3 about here)

Men from broken homes and men from unbroken homes have similar crime rates when effects of supervision and parental affection are controlled.

To provide a further check on the possibility that broken homes contribute to crime in some causal way, the four qualitative scales and the scale dividing homes into broken and unbroken ones were used in stepwise multiple regression procedures. Regressions were made on four measures of crime: number of convictions for serious crimes against persons, number of convictions for serious crimes against property, total number of convictions for serious crimes, and whether or not a man had been convicted for any serious crime. In none of these multiple regressions did the broken home variable contribute significantly to the explained variance. (See Table 4.)

(Table 4 about here)

Conflict and parent aggression were the most important predictors of number of crimes against persons, $F(2,227)=7.64$, $p=.0006$. Supervision and parental affection were the most important predictors of

crimes against property, $F(2,227)=9.34$, $p=.0001$. Supervision, conflict, and parental affection together accounted for 11% of the explained variance in total number of serious crimes committed, $F(3,226)=9.30$, $p=.0001$. The four qualitative variables each contributed significantly to the 15.4% of explained variance in predicting whether a man had been convicted for any serious crime, $F(4,225)=10.26$, $p=.0001$.

Broken homes contributed less than one-tenth of 1% to the explained variance on any of the measures of crime. Even when the effects of broken homes were maximized (by entering that variable first into the model), broken homes were not reliably related to the measures of crime.

The third proposed link between broken homes and crime suggested that their relationship is accidental. This third model appears to be correct. Parental conflict, parent aggression, parental rejection of the child, and lack of supervision are related to crime in a way consistent with the hypothesis that they cause crime. Discriminant linear functions based on these four variables correctly identify 111 (74%) of the 150 noncriminals and 50 (62.5%) of the 80 criminals. As compared with chance identification (based on known prior probabilities), the four qualitative variables provide a 15.2% overall improvement in identification of criminals and noncriminals ($z=4.63$, $p=.0001$).

The same four qualitative variables are also related to broken homes. Discriminant functions based on the qualitative variables describing families correctly identify 115 (88.3%) of the 130 unbroken homes and 56 of the 100 broken homes. As compared with chance, the qualitative home descriptions provided a 23.9% improvement in identi-

fication of broken homes ($z=7.12$, $p=.0001$).

If broken homes caused the qualitative differences which, in turn, cause crime, then broken homes would be rightly considered a contributing cause of crime. The possibility that broken homes cause "bad families" and "bad families" cause crime would remain plausible if broken homes were related to crime. Yet broken homes do no better than chance at discriminating between criminals and noncriminals.[4]

The link between broken homes and crime appears, therefore, to be that they have a common source.

Discussion

In this study, measures of family life were based on information reported during childhood. Thirty years later, criminal records were collected. Since criminality generally occurred after termination of the project from which data about childhood had been gathered, the causal interpretation of relationships between family-life and crime is assumed to be unidirectional. Different causal models of possible links between family life and crime have been examined.

The possibility that broken homes cause crime when "catalytic agents" are present was tested through using parental conflict or aggressive models as possible catalytic agents. Propositionally, the model which was tested asserts: <u>If broken homes and (conflict or aggressive models) then crime rates will be higher</u>. This model was rejected because its equivalent conjunction was negated: the conjunction of broken homes with conflict or aggression was coupled with no

increase in crime rates.[5]

The possibility that broken homes have criminogenic effects when these homes lack certain socializing forces was tested through using absence of affection and absence of supervision as relevant socializing forces. Propositionally, the model which was tested asserts: If broken homes and (not affection or not supervision) then crime rates will be higher. This model, too, was rejected because its equivalent conjunction was negated: the conjunction of broken homes with absence of affection or absence of supervision was coupled with no increase in crime rates.

Evidence of the concomitant variation between the four qualitative descriptions of the homes and whether the homes were broken is consistent with either of two propositions: (a) If homes are broken, then the homes are likely to become "bad homes."[6] (b) If homes are "bad," then they are likely to be broken. If (a) were true, then broken homes would be causally related to crime.

Evidence from this study appears to support the proposition: (c) If homes are "bad," then crime rates are high. Assuming both (a) and (c) are true, then a further proposition follows: (d) If homes are broken, then crime rates are high.[7] Since the equivalent conjunction of (d) is false and (c) seems to be true, (a) is rejected.[8]

The evidence from this study is consistent with two propositions: (b) If homes are "bad," then they are likely to be broken and (c) If homes are "bad," then they are likely to cause crime. When there is ostensible covariation between broken homes and crime, this seems to

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The evidence from this study is consistent with two propositions: (b) If homes are "bad," then they are likely to be broken and (c) If homes are "bad," then they are likely to cause crime. When there is ostensible covariation between broken homes and crime, this seems to

be due to what might be called the "overlapping effects" of certain types of homes.

If the results of this study are valid, the implications touch both the researcher and the practitioner: So long as researchers focus on parental absence as a central variable for describing childhood, they are likely to reach the false conclusion that childhood has little impact on subsequent behavior; so long as practitioners focus on broken homes in their efforts to reduce crime, they are likely to make little progress.

Footnotes

[1]See Power & Witmer (1951) for details about selection of the men.

[2]Brothers and men whose homes had been broken when they were between the ages of 16 and 21 were excluded from this study.

[3]See McCord & McCord (1960) for a more complete description of the coding.

[4]The figures are 55.7% predicting from broken homes and 54.8% predicting from known distributions alone.

[5]'$P_x \supset Q_x$' is equivalent to '$-(P_x . -Q_x)$'. See, for example: Quine (1950) or Hilbert & Ackermann (1950).

[6]i.e., have conflict or aggressive models or rejecting parents or lack supervision.

[7]'$P_x \supset Q_x$' and '$Q_x \supset R_x$' implies '$P_x \supset R_x$'.

[8]The formal proof is as follows:

Assume: (1) Broken homes ⊃ Bad homes

Assume: (2) Bad homes ⊃ Higher crime rates

(3) Broken homes ⊃ Higher crime rates (from (1)and(2))

(4) -(Broken homes&not higher crime rates) (equivelance with (3))

*(5) Broken homes & not higher crime rates

(6) Either -(broken homes ⊃ bad homes) or

-(Bad homes ⊃ higher crime rates) (from (1)-(5))

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* (5), (7) are supported by the evidence in this study.

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TABLE 1

CRIMINAL BEHAVIOR & CHILDHOOD HOME

(Means & Standard Deviations)

	Number of Noncriminals	Number of Criminals	Number of Crimes (per criminal)	Age at First Conviction
Type of Home:				
Broken	61	39	2.36(2.16)	17.31(7.70)
Unbroken	89	41	2.20(1.65)	19.07(8.85)
	NS			
Conflict:				
Present	35	40	2.33(2.02)	18.18(8.28)
Absent	115	40	2.23(1.80)	18.25(8.44)
	χ^2=16.88; p=.0001			
Supervision:				
Absent	53	47	2.70(2.18)**	16.68(7.49)*
Present	97	33	1.67(1.22)	20.39(9.02)
	χ^2=11.64; p=.0006			
Parent Aggression:				
Present	46	44	2.25(2.06)	18.36(7.57)
Absent	104	36	2.31(1.72)	18.03(9.23)
	χ^2=12.97; p=.0003			
Parent Affection:				
Absent	83	63	2.38(1.75)	16.79(6.97)*
Present	67	17	1.88(2.39)	23.47(10.72)
	χ^2=12.34; p=.0004			

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

TABLE 2

CONFLICT, PARENT AGGRESSION, & CRIME

(% of each family type who were convicted)

	Unbroken Homes	Broken Homes
Conflict & Aggression	(N=18)72.2	(N=22)54.5
Conflict or Aggression	(N=43)34.9	(N=42)45.2
Neither Conflict nor Aggression	(N=69)18.8	(N=36)22.2

TABLE 3

PARENT AFFECTION, SUPERVISION, & CRIME

(% of each family type who were convicted)

	Unbroken Homes	Broken Homes
Affection & Supervision	(N=34)8.8	(N=26)23.1
Affection or Supervision	(N=56)33.9	(N=38)34.2
Neither Affection nor Supervision	(N=40)47.5	(N=36)55.6

TABLE 4
REGRESSION OF FAMILY VARIABLES ON CRIME

A. Crimes Against Persons

	5-Variable Model R^2=.074 F=3.56 DF=5,224 P=.0042		Best Model R^2=.063 F=7.64 DF=2,227 P=.0006	
	F	P	F	P
Broken Homes	0.00	.9461		
Conflict	4.00	.0466	6.51	.0114
Supervision	2.05	.1540		
Parent Aggression	5.31	.0221	5.68	.0180
Parent Affection	0.06	.8036		

B. Crimes Against Property

	5-Variable Model R^2=.085 F=4.16 DF=5,224 P=.0013		Best Model R^2=.076 F=9.34 DF=2,227 P=.0001	
	F	P	F	P
Broken Homes	0.07	.7988		
Conflict	0.67	.4143		
Supervision	7.46	.0068	10.01	.0018
Parent Aggression	0.90	.3438		
Parent Affection	3.40	.0664	4.60	.0330

C. Total Number of Convictions

	5-Variable Model R^2=.120 F=6.12 DF=5,224 P=.0001		Best Model R^2=.110 F=9.30 DF=3,226 P=.0001	
	F	P	F	P
Broken Homes	0.06	.8105		
Conflict	2.54	.1126	4.23	.0408
Supervision	9.35	.0025	10.03	.0018
Parent Aggression	2.59	.1087		
Parent Affection	3.16	.0770	4.26	.0402

D. Whether Any Convictions

	5-Variable Model R^2=.155 F=8.21 DF=5,224 P=.0001		Best Model R^2=.154 F=10.26 DF=4,225 P=.0001	
	F	P	F	P
Broken Homes	0.15	.6971		
Conflict	6.89	.0093	8.17	.0046
Supervision	4.10	.0441	4.80	.0294
Parent Aggression	6.97	.0089	6.92	.0091
Parent Affection	5.0.	.0259	4.96	.0269